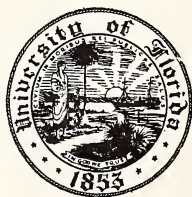


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A Star by Day



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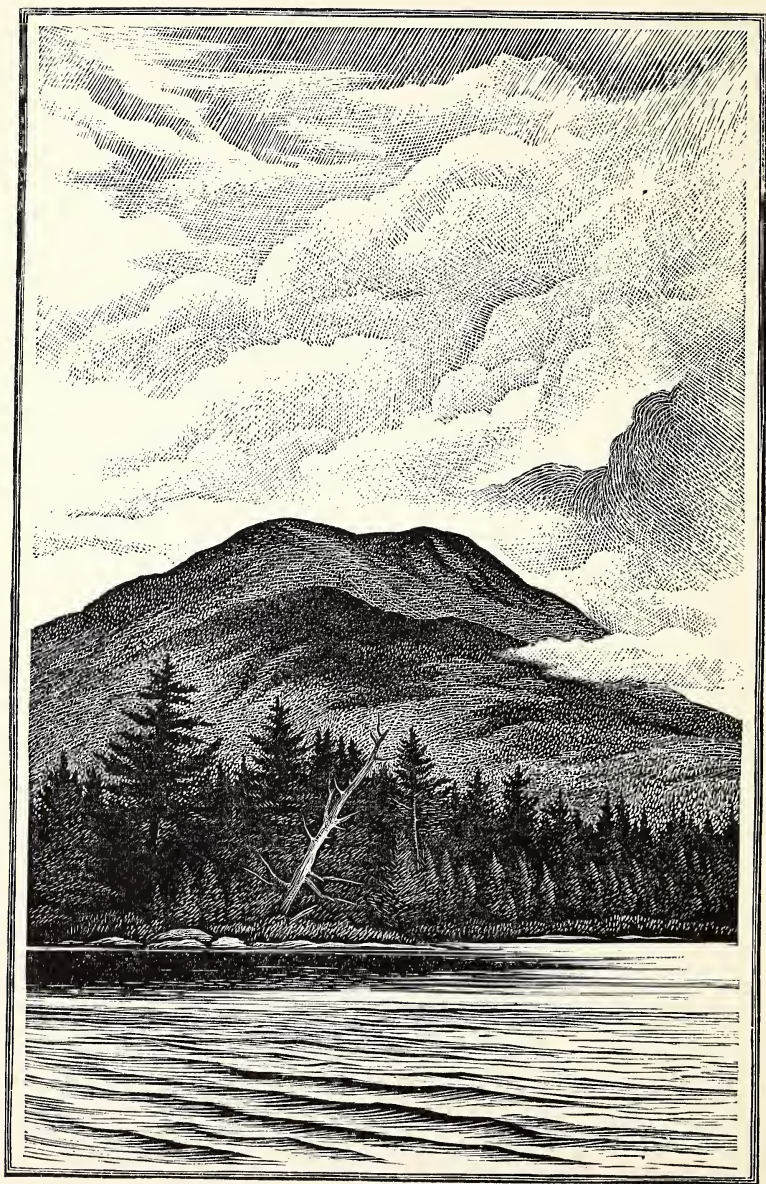
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Books by David McCord

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Anthologies Once and for All · What Cheer · The Pocket Book of Humorous Verse



A Star by Day

BY DAVID McCORD

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.

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Vol. 1

For My Mother

Nearly all of these poems have previously appeared in various publications. For that I am grateful to the editors of the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, the *Yale Review*, the *Virginia Quarterly*, *The New Yorker*, *Tomorrow*, *The Lyric*, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, the *New York World*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *American Mercury*, the *Commonweal*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New York Post*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, and the *Boston Globe*.

The Dawn Stone was first read as the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard University in 1938. D. T. W. MCC.

Frontis: Mt. Ktaadn

by Thomas W. Nason, N.A.

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A Star by Day

On Ebb-Tide Sand

The shadow accents on the beach
Are sharper than the stones I feel,
The print of toe and shoeless heel
Is able as the sound of speech.

A man has walked between two tides
And set his feet to act as tongue
And tell me that I must be young
To follow on his least asides.

The little pool of pulsing weed
Abandoned on the rocky shelf
Is all the sea unto itself,
It held his face and saw his need;

And what the sea came home to whelp
In black defection on the shore
Speaks louder than the breakers roar
Through broken barrel, keel, and kelp.

By dunes of one one-sided trough
Sand led him on, as it was sand
That gave him land-direction, and
There was the sea to stand him off.

Of foam borne inward from the sea,
Lost with the lost, his life tracks die
What way one's dissolutions lie—
As his for him and mine for me.

Too Shady Tree

Too shady tree,
You were not meant for me.
My self-cast shadow falls so dark
From body rougher than your bark,
I have not failed to see
How ancient areas of green,
Like roof on roof, can rise between
The earth and sun,
In life in leaf begun
Before man came to disagree,
And leave so clean a mark upon the one
As there may ever be.

Firefly Field

O little firefly field,
So cool with night
So fresh with flower!
A field of stars has not your power
To turn the sight
Against that vaster height.

And yield for yield,
Till heaven shall fall away,
From my lone fence-top tower
I'll take the darkness broken by your shower:
No other stars so gay
Or rapturous in play.

A Star by Day

A star that burst one afternoon
Between me and the earth-lit moon,
And saved some field from being plowed,
Became, as once it was, a cloud.

Some vagrancy had made me pause
For heaven to punctuate a clause,
To drop her comma in the blue,
Though legible to very few.

Better, perhaps: a star that spoke
In simple terms of fire and smoke,
But soundless with the stale report
Of ancient wars and dragon snort.

I saw it flare and turn to fleece
And in the air obtain release:
A cloud for those who looked too late
To see what meteors create.

I leaned against some solid stone
Or brick that I could call my own
And, fearful of the universe,
I watched another world disperse.

It feathered out, the way of mist
And not of iron-spark and grist:
You couldn't tell for losing shape
It wasn't what it set to ape.

Perhaps some fragment came to grief
As, with a lesser turn, the leaf;
And let the upper current lift
Its greater part in subtle rift.

But most, I thought, it wasn't strange
That stars will shoot beyond their range,
Beyond their time and normal spread,
And fall to earth in daylight, dead.

We've built so much against the dark
In brilliant room and flooded park,
And come so far beyond the night,
A star by day is deadly right.

Of Red in Spring

The maple's bloom is red,
There's red in early spring;
Winter, we know, is dead,
And dead's the final thing.

Autumn, we saw, was done,
Whose smoke is chilled to ash;
But still the red comes on,
And still the mountains flash.

Who lit these kindling flares,
Since winter stood between,
To take us unawares,
Who thought the spring was green?

Cicada

That katydid in yonder tree
Has something now to say to me.
If I could find him, find his limb,
I'd have a word to say to him.

But he is green as green the leaf:
The soul of Proust within Moncrieff
Is not more perfectly contained
Than he is perfectly ingrained.

A word with me is all he wants.
I know the word, and my response
Each summer's end has been the same:
To stop it running like a flame

Across the leaf-to-leaf abyss.
When sorrow empties down to this,
Must all my traded long-ago
Remind me that I know, I know?

The Engine and the Pool

It seems improbable now: a kind of
Twilit dream about a friendly comet, perfecto
Size, passing in passage not the outer
Suns, the stars, some binaries, a planet, Earth
For instance, but his own front porch,
His own front door—himself—and pausing then
(As never was the habit of the creature)
To say a word in greeting and to leave
A sprinkle of fresh ichthyoidal scale
To stir the memory that in a salmon
Fisherman's good enough for some things
Anyway: Too good, perhaps, off-season:
The river isn't there to calm the mind
And cool the knees.

But this is how it was.

I

Men coming to the river in the spring
Before the ice had gone, before the sun
Found time or latitude for northern Maine,
Led speculation on that trembly timber
Bridge across the water
Above the salmon pool.

How many Aprils
Solid down to May locked both abutments
With the blue clamp that keystone-ice can shape
To counter structures poised the other way!
Many. But year to year, as yet no winter,
I mean no roaring spring, had done the damage
Long on the cards that said it would be done.
The bridge still stood—still stands.

A kind of causeway
Led out to it, off from it, safely spanning
The three dried oxbows of the fluvial past
In riding straight as Euclid to its purpose—
A crossing good for grade, exact for angle,
And right to cheat the morning sun that glittered
Largely on the upper pool.
One way the bridge looked off to pleasant prospects,
Distant and wild: the other to the mountain
Round which the tracks made quick to disappear.
The lean men with brown beards and poles and peaveys,
Who followed the first race of logs and ice
That piled the one like jackstraws on the other,
In disentangling what the sun was melting
Were always glad on rounding bends above
To sight that lonely bridge beside Todd's logan—
You don't say salmon pool except on paper—
The last they'd trouble with that spring, that river.

Todd's logan? Logan is a Maine lagoon:
 Out West a fellow who became a berry.
 Well, this Todd was a man, a passer-out of Maine,
 Who disappeared but wrote his name in water
 About the time Thoreau and Joseph Polis,
 His Indian guide, were riding rough and smooth
 The Mattawamkeag somewhere in the fifties.
 Then salmon filled Maine's rivers, running and spawning
 In water choked with nothing worse than logs,
 Bateaux, canoes, ice—all in season.
 No chemicals, no shavings, bark; no circular
 Saws to swirl the amber dust of death.
 The green state, clean of stream.
 Some wretched history since has touched Todd's river.
 The darkest chapter deals with his lagoon:
 Industry above, black water to the sea.

Todd's was the sweet pool up or down for twenty
 Green Maine miles; the years had only shaped it
 Better for resting fish and fishing men.
 Even the bridge shared in it, cleaving current,
 Fencing the water with a latticed shadow.
 A few trout, wise old squaretails, came to live there;
 Moved in a long succession of long summers
 After the great pollution stopped,
 And figured large in dreams of anglers prowling
 In happy accident those happy banks.
 Then one day in the nineteen-thirties
 Somebody said *salmon* casually, almost,

And there they were returned—testing the clearest current,
Fresh-run, home, up in the shelving waters
Where ancestral eggs had hatched pure silver
That ran like silver: quick, alive, and gone.

3

One morning in a coastal town a doctor,
Haunted by what was hanging in his closet,
Fevered a little by toxemic summer,
Tired from his rounds of measles, coughs, and
Cardiacs, the new-born nameless, suddenly
Cut the umbilical of his stethoscope,
Rummaged in moth-ball darkness and emerged,
A new man with an old dream headed north.
The sun was hardly on the eastern faces
Of convening mountains when the doctor,
Breasting a growth of fern-fronds in his path,
Heard the sweet mumble of that stony water
And saw, like the flag of a just-frightened buck,
The foaming rapids from the salmon pool, and the old bridge
beyond.

A big blue heron leaned away in flight,
His slow wings steady as a sleeper's pulse.

Busy with rod and ferrules, Silver Greys,
And other dear-named articles of trade,
The doctor paused to loop with his deft fingers
Familiar gut to tapered line—the suture
Happiest of all he knew. Then quietly

He slipped away upstream to where the trail led
Out on a little promontory starred with moss.
There he knelt and, scanning the light low water,
Observed two salmon by the wonted stone,
Twelve yards above the tail. Two grey destroyers,
Submarines: powerful, poised, alerted, and aware.
Just below them, once in the old days, thought the doctor,
A little clinic of us fishing here
Along in May were just a bit astonished
When the distinguished surgeon applied to his
Snell hook—a number six—the juicy vermiform
Appendix he had brought down in a bottle.
It took too, was the funny part.

4

But now
To other business. Into the shallows just above.
We'll fish this wet, downstream; swing the fly over.
Over and over, three times. So it went. A rise. . . .
And then the long cast ceased and the doctor smoked,
Watching the water for a hatch of flies.
How still the air was now, with the sun climbing,
The birds gone, one lone teetertail collecting
At water edge each washed-up grub and bug
On each emerging rock up to the bridge.
Listen! Why, yes, it could be. That's the rumble
Of a train behind the mountain. So they must
Be using the old railroad still! I thought it
Was abandoned—up for scrap.

Some louder . . . loud . . .

And pretty soon the doctor
Perceived the antiquated engine puffing
Round the spiral easement of the grade
That led up to the pool.

A hand waved
From the cab. A blue shirt and a red bandanna
Leaned far out, and the hand was lifted. The other
Hand seemed somehow to get hold of
That invisible throttle and whatever,
Grinding, creaking—those were the timbers creaking—
And blessed if that queer train, with Mr.
Westinghouse helping a little with a burst of air,
Didn't come full stop in the bridge's middle—
Three flat cars and one box, caboose
Hanging to landward in a thread of smoke.
Whispers and sighing and subsiding creaks, and
“Say, Doc, what you got?”

“Not yet.”

The doctor (rightly addressed by chance)
Stood up now—quietly too, as not forgetting
He was a fisherman first. The engineer
Just shook his head. “Too clear,” he said. “The
Water's low.”

“I know it.”

“And besides,
You ain't just where they're lyin'.
That would be right here.” A canvas glove
Pointed downstream, off left. “Three good ones there.
I'll just pull off. You try 'em.”

And he pulled
Across the three dried oxbows of that long ago,
Ground to a second squeaky stop, and waited. The doctor
Knocked out his ashes, fiddled five long minutes
With a change of fly, and waded in.
The strangest clinic a man ever had
In this beloved art!

“He’s got a schedule,
I suppose,” the doctor muttered. “I hope the patient lives.
Instruments ready: well, here goes.” His wrist
Flexed backward, forward . . . pause.

So that’s the story.

The fish?

The fish weighed sixteen pounds, four ounces.

Under the Zodiac

In the small years there came a man
Concerned to sell me on the clouds:
He led no gypsy caravan,
Yet talked as one unknown to crowds.

I met him where the dark wood by
The open field had drawn the line
That made my preference the sky
As his would seem to be the pine.

There in the sober shade he sat
And looked at me across the sun,
Its flickering upon his hat,
Its fire in me, need I to run.

And long he looked, beyond and through
And out and up to where the mass
Of cloudy shapes against the blue
Controlled the shadows on the grass.

"My little man, as you grow up,
As you grow old, as you grow wise,
As you shall break the sterile cup,
As you may win to other skies,

“Asking, unanswered; telling, told;
Friendly, befriended; anxious, crossed;
Never forget that you behold
In the great sky the kingdom lost.

“Nothing you make but shall be made
More beautiful than love is fond
By wind and weather in the glade
That runs forever and beyond.”

The sun shone down upon his face,
The dayborne clouds sailed to the rim
Beyond the hills of every place.
And many times I've thought of him.

Reflection in Blue

Blue sea, blue sky, blue eggs:
O bird of yellow legs,
Which is the bluest blue
Of all you lead me to?

The sea is blue with sky
As iris is with eye;
The egg is blue with each,
Though far from either's reach.

Since Eve in Eden fell
The miracle of shell
Has been of sea and air
In all the blue that's there:

One shell has held the sea,
The life that's given me;
The sky's a shell as clear
As all you've nested here.

Gulls on the Ice

The river wind that stormy day
Found something new for its winter play
Before it blew out in the bay.

The warm rain slanting on the ice
Smelled of a wintry-summer spice
And set one river flowing twice:

Once in the channel as before
The surface froze like a ballroom floor,
And now on the ice where it mattered more.

The gulls stood six in a flawless row,
Preferring the rip to a shore of snow,
Glad of the cloud that could rain down so.

They stood by the edge of an open break,
Not for the wind but the water's sake;
And a Mallard swam with a green-ringed drake.

The wind lay hard on the water-sheet:
It swirled web-deep at the standing feet
Where a man would slip with an iron cleat.

If a gull swung round, he would take a brace
With his wings out full to keep his place—
Like a child who walks with a want of grace.

He could stand tiptoe as about to start,
But he had no gift in the walker's art,
And his soles refused to exact their part.

If he took one step he began to slide
Or he sat right down in his wounded pride,
With his wings still poised and dignified.

It was clear at least that a graceful bird,
With more in his flight than the poet's word,
Has a way of his own to appear absurd:

His following ships and the shoreless sound
In freedom hardly the sky can bound
Is a lonely humor when gone aground.

Perpetual Motion

Fat father robin,
A red rubber ball,
Rolls across the lawn
And bounces off the wall.

Rolls, bounces, rolls away,
Hearing in the ground
The worm talking tunnel
And the mole saying mound.

For Example

The laws of physics have us in their toils.
The one to think about again is Boyle's:
Boyle is concerned with volume under pressure
What is the shrinkage under grinning Cheshire?

The Dawn Stone

I

West of all else, one would suppose and I suppose it now:
A man looks east. The world is full of men
Who live to see their way of going gone; fail, disavow
Their star, their sun, their soul, and then
Face backward—O but when
Clear evening light falls kindlier on the brow.

So man might be a mountain, like a mountain have *two* suns,
And tower the first in light, the last in dark;
And let light follow him what way the sky can train her guns
Sharp-sighted, certain of their mark:
For him alone the spark,
The golden sweep, the soundless clarions.

Where man is mixed with distance, vexed with north, south,
east, and west,
He turns the same face to both ends of day;
The early sun that filled the eyes of childhood burned the
best,
But homeward levels of the ray
Find him too far away,
Certain alone of some uncertain quest.

A creature of the sun, he'll sometimes weigh the mountain
part:

Not double-faced, but borrowing the crown
And finding in the after-flash of dawn some strength of heart,
Some relative and rare renown
Borne suddenly shining down
To save him from the false and footless start.

West is the way of cloudy mind refocusing in fire,
The Golden Gate no straight American dream;
The reach of life, the warmth of wine, the fiber of desire
No stronger than one waning gleam,
One rapier through the seam
Of frail disturbance round the sunset pyre.

East is the answer to the question all the earthbound ask:
Glory of coming day! Day after night;
Day for a man to act in, cast aside obsequious mask,
Rise with a universal might,
Fight the empiric fight—
Subside in clerkdom, fevering at his task.

Perhaps the dawnmarks of the world hold visions for him
still,
And his repair to local heights is known
In Deuteronomy and back to prehistoric hill,
Where man's a maxillary bone
But the crude earth is shown
Twirling 'twixt hope and fate with ample skill.

Ktaadn is the dawnstone of New England by some strange
 Coincidence of light and natural law
 Since Indian myth first drifted down the Appalachian Range:
 The obvious fact without a flaw
 Which some Thoreauvian saw
 Before Thoreau, and now too late to change.

First mountain of our continent to catch the morning bead
 Of sunlight tangent to Atlantic salt,
 Whose ancient rock ("cloud-factory" said Thoreau) has
 split the seed
 And source of life through blue-cobalt,
 Swift to its first default,
 And scattered dayspring as the law decreed.

But Euclid touched with geodetic algebra does prove
 Another dawnstone in West Quoddy Head;
 And since light flowing landward fills the international
 groove,
 It may be some is sooner shed
 Round Halifax instead,
 Whence the last boulder shuddered and ceased to move.

The bras d'or and the Labrador, the Forillon Gaspé—
 My old Ktaadn myth must falter there!
 Six hundred miles to windward, when the east is making
 grey,
 Who knows what unrecorded stair

Climbs the cold resinous air
To reach the red rim rising from the bay?

A week of testing altitude with calipers will leave
As much of doubt as there be answer found;
The state might set a marker and its granite head retrieve
The sun today on scheduled round,
Yet where he's brought to ground
Tomorrow none but eagles could achieve.

Relieved of relativity, the old half-truth may stand,
Or Maine might cede to Canada such claim;
Light bends indifferent still to Quoddies, politics, and land,
Though pure equation chance to name
Strange mountains taking aim
For sunshaft one might catch with open hand.

3

New England full of dawnstone is a different kind of crop
Than boulder fields abandoned or condensed
In practice polygons, and squares, and walls that never stop
Until the fathers' land is fenced
And their first duty sensed
As finished—so their gravestone lies on top.

And where New England moved across a continent in search
Of something glimpsed in planting glacial waste

The westward eye grew somber as wide plains succeeded
birch,

Until the plains at length erased
Themselves in the god-graced
Stupendous Rockies, sun-capped like a church.

Then what the fathers carved in stone the west constrained
to hope,

As arrowhead and rutless wheel attest;
They carried into Oregon the fortitude to cope
With fullness as in days oppressed
They prospered and never guessed,
For so the vine strays toward the sunny slope.

The miracle of light is in itself, not in the source;
And first-light is one principle of truth
So piercing strong that man must always reckon with its
force,

Not as an accent of lost youth
Or fortuneteller's booth,
But the great beacon of immortal course.

A race whose roots thrive in the soil, whose blood is of the
sea,

Will range through longitudes nor lose its star;
Such constancy in light is still the reaching of the tree,
The spinning of the seed borne far
Beyond the plowed earth scar,
The swallow's wing flown home, the flowering bee.

Ktaadn on one granite face may bear the young blade's
stroke,
But still the sword has flashed in eyes asleep;
The brighter man has blown his fire, the higher climbed his
smoke,
The better grain he has to reap,
The finer friends to keep—
The sweeter rang the steel before it broke.

4

It may be true that cities are a tax against the creed
Of light, against authority of sky:
They raise a flaming barrier to sanctify the deed,
Yet issue the direct defy
To something you and I
Would not exchange for supersonic speed.

And towers in the age of wings will rise with each fresh
glance,
The part component of an urge to soar;
Though little of the sun they spear will find the morning
slants
Through back-yard wash and traffic roar
To the fast-bolted door
Against the marvels of our swift advance.

The more he lives for stainless steel, the more a man goes
soft:
To burnish his poor streamlined subway soul,

Here is a dawnstone (eighty floors) with restaurant aloft;
And somewhere toward some doubtful goal
The Diesel-dowered roll
Whose fathers froze in air-conditioned croft.

O world of waste and wonder, filth and plenty, hate and
health!

America, my world, where is the life,
The battle air we played before the monster in his stealth
Cracked down with fierce loud-speakered life,
Gave us the ringside wife,
And choked the highways with a false-front wealth?

Beyond our shores, both shores, the clouds of fear have
scudded low;
And half the world still stammering with pain,
Frightened behind the eyes, awaits the unpragmatic blow:
New nightfall on the China slain,
The bloody beast of Spain,
The time-fused manna where there's corn to grow.

Great searchlights premising the dark with boreal design
Report the restless power that is no myth:
Their long clean fingers draw dead white the world-invasion
line,
But bear no gleam of kin or kith,
Strike the false colith,
To fade uneasy in the strong sunshine.

Who has not sinned in light against the light? These fever-
chills

Of man afraid of man, the sorry spawn

Of life afraid of life: how shall we name such disparate ills?

Where is the field we're fighting on?

Where in the distant dawn

Will eyes be lifted to the stainless hills?

1938

Christmas, 1943

The Christmas star for each of us tonight
Swings in Orion or the Southern Cross:
We feel no distance, as we fear no loss,
Where now the belted hunter climbs in sight

Of Iceland and Alaska; where below,
By islands, atolls, over barrier reef,
The mariner's old skymark brings relief
In chartrooms when her lamps begin to show.

Be it for us apart—the safe, the grounded—
Sitting at table in this candleshine,
Warm in the gift of friends and food and wine,
To think aloft and far and on the rounded

Warring world. May every one of ours,
Beholding in an alien sky his star,
Think once of other countrymen who are
Thinking of him in faith that overpowers.

On V-E Morning

*Lord, make us humble, those who did not share
The fighting, we who were not there,
And cleanse for them afar the christening air
In countries for whose freedom they have bled.
"Magnificently proud of them," we said.
Lord, and Thy mercy on the unlistening dead.*

So the curtain falls on Act I of the most hideous
two-act play the world has ever sat to:
An act that ended with nothing but an amber
spot, cold on the cold stone face of Germany
(Like the tearing of a bandage suddenly from
dead eyes).

There will be no intermission. Presently, twelve
thousand miles away, the grisly curtain will
Fall for a second time, with the last of the bad
actors—

Villain, bully, coward, killer, Quisling, usurper,
enslaver—

Howled from the stage of this green Eden Earth
To the nethermost bombproved shelters of Eternity . . .

But the stage sets, blasted and broken, will
remain,
And somewhere in the ghostly wings still wander

The fallen, the robbed, the ravaged, the blinded,
the old, the starved, the terrified, the pitiful,
And the children—*the children!*—who wanted
none of it, but
Were the madman's extras.

Now

With bells of a whole hemisphere set ringing,
Lights up, doors open, voices lifted, freedom blowing
Across wide lands that suffered, resisted, failed
to be broken, and are free,
The liberal and liberating Nations bow
In grief, in grievance, in all human dole
For all the sad inhuman dealings
Done, and all the saddening healings unbegun,
And all new sorrow till this war is won.

1945

Litany: Another Morning

Unfold unfold
Thou beaten-gold
Harmonic third
Beyond the word
Beyond the long
Unsung the song
Beyond the song

From the sea and the sky and the lean of the land
And the world in the round
To the way of the head and the way of the hand
And the way of the soul is the way of the sound

In jubilee
In jubilo
Beneath this tree
• The waters flow

The cry unanswered in the cry as joy and sorrow pass:
The woodwind singing through the wood: no shadow
on the grass

Though man was born a rebel
Rebellion in his face
 O voices in the treble
Yet shall he win to grace
 O voices in the bass
Yet shall he find his place
Time in the space of space

Soft as the summer night along the diapason shore
The far forgotten music of the world is at the door
And open open open cry the voices as before

Symbol symbol symbol: symbol in the sky!
The light of stars the gravid sun the watchful eye!
Sound sound sound: sound of the trumpet! Blow
The sound as when a time of singing willed it so!

1949

Oscillogram

News drifted back that nothing had gone forward;
Abroad, most countries had their ups and downs.
Areas X and 5 from peace moved warward,
Smiles on official faces countered frowns.

Steadily to and fro, the sentry pacing
Noted the common dark of east and west.
Pulses so quiet yesterday were racing;
Questions unanswered turned to riddles guessed.

Open and shut, the diplomatic pouches
Swallowed and spewed antiphonal yes and no;
The supersonic kick drew sonic *ouches!*
Each international ebb acknowledged flow.

So it continued. Inside out, the papers
Shifted the news from left to right at will.
Behind the smoke, ahead one sensed the vapors:
Still climbing toward the light we slid down hill.

1950

Borne In

When I've been off by train to some far place
And come back home to find the inward grace,
And closed my door and looked between the hands
Of one familiar clock to see how stands
Their compass on that merry moon-slit dial—
Some grandfather had bargained there for style—
I feel assured by what has time to spare
That I have time to seek the obvious chair:
A serious kind of saving or repair.
But there it is—until my footfalls cease,
As when the Persian sailed back home from Greece.
The querulous world is clamoring for peace:
I'll slow down for a moment quietly, without shame,
Calling it comfort for no better name.

The Beaver

Out walking one spring in new woods
By jack-in-the-pulpit green hoods
And spirals of fern in the frond,
But closer than they to the pond,
I came on a woodcutter's slash
In a fringing of beechwood and ash.

The woodsman had gone for the day,
Or off with his family to play
At swimming the incoming stream
Or diving through froth-feathered cream
Below where the water ran out.
If I summoned him back with a shout,

O he'd come! But not he with an ax
Or by the least visible tracks—
And only as far as meant home
Or the muskrat's adaptable dome;
And the water would answer my hail
With a slap from the flat of his tail.

But freedom was more to my mind:
I would leave him alone with his kind.

The pond he had made to my sight
Of ungranted riparian right,
With its calm and reflectory powers,
Had drowned but an acre of flowers.

And chiding him not for his plan
Or a vision too worthy of man,
I grudged him inherited will
And a more than incisory skill
For the way, without shedding of blood,
He could put a free forest in flood.

So long as the water held out,
And his luck with the devils of drought,
In a history not of mistake
His pond was the length of a lake;
His house had the strength of a stone,
In water as dry as a bone.

Believing belief, as it were,
It is hard to believe he could err;
Yet evidence there in the wood
Declared he once misunderstood
Or failed to apply to a birch
The rules of an ancient research.

A logger of sapling and tree,
He felled them as neat as could be
Till one, for whatever his worth,
Had challenged him, beaver to girth,

And bravely remained with the mark
Of a spiral cut into the bark.

The answer is simple, I know:
He went to the tree in the snow,
And after a winter of drift,
But when it was ready to lift
With the melting and rotting of rain.
He circled the tree but in vain;

He sank like a wheel in a rut,
The corkscrew was all he could cut.
He knew that his notch ought to meet,
But body kept thawing the feet,
And feet brought him nearer the ground:
He chewed himself two times around.

To baffle the instinct is hard:
One tree was as much as he marred,
And none but the judgment of man
Will appraise what he badly began.
His life as an art to an end
Leaves nothing for breaker to mend.

Ahead of All

Ahead of the clouds, of their own kind:
Ahead of the sun, and sunset signed,
Ahead of window and lantern light,
Of the waterstar and of my blind
Mild northern summer night,
In homeward flight
With clear pursuit not far behind,
Five crows range in my sight
From the valley I could not find.

Ahead of color, of sound, of sea,
Of mountain through the spire of tree;
Ahead of man and the mind of man,
Of cities that were and are to be;
Of the pencil ciphers at the plan
Since life began
To stretch the sky from it to me,
O rootless, wild New Brunswick clan!
Ahead of death, but what ahead of thee?

Ahead of earth, of tongue and eye,
Of dream and soul, of human cry:
In homeward passage the last, the least,
From some unlike or bleak society;

Ahead of west, and dawns ahead of east,
Of bird and beast,
They fly, fly still! the first to fly
Ahead of all: O when the sun has ceased,
How otherwise remember summer sky?

Dog in a Car

He grins a little as they drive him by.
Of what his nose needs there's a fresh supply
Round every corner, up the rainy field:
He has no daily walk of equal yield.
His head hangs out, his tongue out farther still;
His bark is bolder from that window sill.
His nose is longer on the modern breeze—
His father being Scotch, not Pekingese.

A lesser breed on leash or running loose
Would find his comradeship of little use;
A dog transported by the family Ford
Rides far beyond the days he loved or warred.
His ancestors on purely urban smells
Leaned hard enough, but they had nothing else.
They hadn't won to his synthetic taste:
Investigation kept them out of haste.

You drive a dog from State to other State:
His senses meet with scents he can't relate.
He hasn't time. His little nostrils twitch.
Was that a rabbit, mole, or brindle bitch?
His eye grows bright. He reaches out in space.
The local brothers hardly see his face.
He's whirling through a night of strange impact:
Of atavistic cats he once attacked.

Sundial in the City

I

My city-sword of light
Is thin but fatal bright.
Be careful! for its mark
Is shadow, fatal dark.

2

Good morrow, brother,
This day is another.
Another will end:
Good evening, friend.

3

Let who will be late,
And let who will wait, wait.

4

To sunshine I incline:
To rainfall not at all.

5

My shadow shapes the spring,
The long absented wing;
The hyla piping forth,
The greening to the north.

6

City of pigeon-blue and sparrow-brown:
The sun does shine and only man does frown.

Backroom Corot

The darkest picture in the darkest room
Was what the old man dimly seemed to want;
And there one met as manifold a doom
As fifty frames could hang above the gaunt,

Half-broken frame in which there dwelt enisled
The scholar's spirit and the poet's tongue,
The sweetness of a softly-spoken child,
To make the customer feel loosely young.

There wasn't one of those storm-ridden oils—
Bleak tessellated cliffs, cold leathern seas—
Which you could buy and live with; but the spoils
Of the old dealer's pillage swung at ease,

The shipwrecked and forlorn, the world afloat
On grimy canvas stiff between the gold,
Whence to the beaches pulled the little boat,
As out of tragedy a tale is told.

And then the light: a conic burst of sun,
Staining the picture cushioned on a chair,
As gentler eyes led mine to look upon
The poetry that held them blinded there.

Shadow and substance, umber into brown,
A flake of blue for sky, faint yellow grass,
A little man highlighted on the crown
Of land against the green impending mass.

Corot, in whose small window shines the soul
Of something lost and never understood,
There still comes back that figure on the knoll,
Diminishing into his magic wood!

Lower 6

In the dead of night,
From my darkened berth,
With the train in flight
On the star-bound earth,

As the miles slip by
And the track talks fast,
Then the half-closed eye
Is to see at last.

And the land that leans
To the mapless thrust
In the far-off greens
Of the day's blue dust

Is a slope of shade
To the penciled dot
Which a light has made
Of a lonely spot

Where the vast upturn
Of the world by day
Is of small concern,
And a world away.

For the witless town
Of the speechless street,
Like the moon, is down;
And the thought is sweet

As the mind steers out
To explore at last
What is free from doubt,
What is cleansed of past,

To return at length
And in peace impart
Of a hidden strength
To the hurt of heart.

He Said, Pointing

My hyperopian friend
Sees things so far away,
Small things at such remove
They need a glass to prove.
What law should sight obey?
Why grade his pupils A?
Far-seeing in the end
Is, like a child's surprise,
Much better when the eyes
Report the distant view
A speculative blend
In color, shape, and size:
Familiar and yet new,
As true and as untrue
As people in a play—
As all that we pretend
Forever and a day.

The Boundary

The end of all is sight:
We steer by day and fear by night,
Accept good health, examine ill,
Each knowing the unknown by right
Of light and shadow on us still.

The falcon's eye, the mole's,
Take all the play between the poles,
Look down and in, and up and on,
As man and man between their souls
See what's to be and what is gone.

The sunlight on the cloud
To lift us from the common crowd
Will leave us in the common dark:
So man will look where he's allowed
And bright stars leave their blackest mark.

Return

Deep after sleep we enter waking
The depths no dream, no dreamer, reached;
And the one shoreless sea forsaking,
On infinite sands our craft is beached.

Eyes shut from eyes, voice crying "voice,"
We safe returned are not the saved.
Whence come the choosers with a choice?
Where stand the sure of something braved?

Brink falls to brink, star gleams to starry
Face of the last galactic stone;
The mind hunts down the immortal quarry,
Self turns to self and is sore alone.

O sleepers, rousing in that gift
Of light, how absolute the day!
The sky has only clouds to lift,
The soul has but to find its way.

Out of November

Selves of myself, these waning days
We meet more often than we used:
You find the late November haze
Too good for ghosts I once refused.

What is it you have come to tell?
I have no adequate replies:
It was not easy to dispel
What now is hard to recognize.

Why should you come? I being weak
In naming new things from the lost:
If you know better angels, speak!
Your world is failing to my cost.

O I shall wake some morning, cold
And wondering half what I'm to say.
My other selves, you'll be too old,
And I'll have no new ghosts to lay.

Smokefall

Then, as if someone spoke
And said, O smell the smoke!
A little shift of breeze
Carried it through the trees
And up to where I sat—
It will always smell like that.
I could gather it into my lungs:
It talked with a hundred tongues
Of what was hurt to hear
When far is kin to near.

I could tell where it was from
As you fix the sound of a drum.
It was round that golden bend
Where the valley means to end;
It was over the other side
Of the hills one hill would hide.
I knew from the smoke I'd smelt
How the leaf-firemaker felt:
He had hidden himself away,
And all that his fire could say
Was said so far from source,
Like a bird blown off its course,
That it made me half afraid
Of his land I shan't invade.

If his fire should find me out
It would kill the one cheerful doubt
I own of autumn smoke
And its breath of maple-oak.
If it burned too close at hand
On a too much manored land,
I should come to smell it ill
As a smoke of private skill.
I want my burning far
In the uplands as they are,
And not for me to trace
Such blent peculiar grace—
Leave that to time and chance
And the day's benevolence.

We have pushed all over maps
To the smokeless polar caps,
And where the logic lay
Is how many miles away?
I want to climb my hill
Where the fall flings yellow still,
And half discover things
That a leaf in smoulder brings.
I want my world to square
With what the mind can spare
From hard industrial faith
For blue and bitter wraith.
I want no trail or guide
To that other other-side.

Sonnet

This is the sonnet: fourteen lines for bones,
Sorrow for marrow, fleshed with life and death;
Small in the eye, biotic, out of breath,
Grey and mysterious in overtones.
Sunglass to Petrarch, a sonnet in the end
Held Milton's blindness, Shakespeare's tacit love,
Wordsworth's impinging world, Keats' star above
His loneliness. One was Rossetti's friend.
All things to all: first light, convective dark;
Young to the old, old magic to the young;
A cloud, a sail, a mountain, and a mark
Against the moon, the singer and the sung.
A stroller and a player, what is more,
Doubling in brass at Auden's marvelous Door.

Reception

All afternoon he searched among the faces,
Shifted his ground in sandwiches and tea
The way a lonely man, in rootless places,
Might cross the mountains to an alien sea.
He said a word in kindness, joined discussion
Remote from all his sickening sense of loss;
Begged once to differ; though he knew no Russian,
Spoke up for Pushkin; gathered little moss
From any rolling stone of chatter, chatter,
Chatter.

The wheels of reason disengaged,
As someone or someone else, it didn't matter,
Smiled at the little boy in him: the caged,
Imprisoned other self that starved and wrote.
And he rushed out and found his hat and coat.

Do Not Disturb

Back to a strange room in a strange hotel
The city followed him where loneliness
Sprawled on the bed. And like an empty shell
Still talking of the sea his new address
Gave eloquent inanechoic proof
That with the neon-lighted world aground,
Within four walls and under starswept roof
He'd rest like any fox ahead of hound.
Call me at seven-thirty. . . . Queer, how queer
To sensitize the film of life with that:
To brood in vibrant darkness on the fear
That bells won't ring, or head fit to a hat,
Or elevator rise for one's descent,
Or the last Arab fold his foldless tent!

Simple Theology

A big barred owl took passage from his wood
One wintry day and came at last to perch
Within the belfry of the village church,
Like Calvinism in his hodden hood,
And settled there for Sunday—or for good.
At dusk he made a swift but ordered search
And packed a public pigeon home with him;
The crystal morning found him far above
His flock of flocks, a dozing cherubim.
No parish ever rightly understood
How pure a belfry is a natural birch,
How pale a pigeon the unnatural dove.
The moral that I must be thinking of
Will come in time—the way a moral should.

The Knowing

One who climbed up from the valley
In a careless unaimed sally
Sat to watch in sundown rally

The little field of sunflower-faces,
Leaning toward the far-off places,
Patient in their day-born graces.

Eyes to westward, tall together,
Stricken by the first fall weather,
Tugging at their grounded tether:

From the simple act of sowing
Such a dignity of growing
Gave them half an air of knowing.

All the sun in all the distance
Dazzled with a sweet consistence
Sad to flower-brief existence.

He was sad with unnamed sorrow
They were not alone to borrow
From the lonely land tomorrow;

They were sad in life suspending,
Yellow in the sun descending
For the shame of flower-ending.

Given each our small acumen:
Let the falling skies illumine
Everything discreetly human.

1849-1949

They see America first. Do they mean to see
In a chromium *City of Denver* the pliant past,
The glove-tight legend the books say 'Tis of thee?

They see America first for the westward roll
Of rainfall-rusty wheat, in the promised shock
Of Illinois, in Wyoming stock, in the sunkist goal.

They see America first in the cotton south,
In the uncapped oil, in the natural-gassed
And pipe-dream soil, in the Mississippi's mouth.

And over the painted desert, across the salt,
Down the bright angels, up the organic rock,
Under sequoias, cedars, the Teton vault,

They see (they tell you) America first. O first
In whose fifth-generation heart, whose blood,
Whose head (that's what I ask!) since our green history
burst

From textbook storage and Colonial damp,
Grew federal wings, played editorial part,
Acquired rereading under the favoring lamp?

Smothered in steel, who lays such serious claim
 To the useful heritage—plain, grandfathered good,
 Stronger than statues, weakest alas in name,

Unvoiced in subway, canyoned in the crush
 Of millions flowering still without the art
 Of roots, far from their noble start in the landward rush?

They see America first, and at last they've seen
 The pioneer turned in from an outward wall—
 Two countries and two oceans, it may have been.

They see that he has but one thing left to explore,
 Aloft and insular, cruel, and speaking hard:
 The city he might forget that he struggled for,

Laid rails, built highways, busheled the gleaming grain:
 The city that sold him short when it grew too tall
 Away from the plow, the ax, and the prairie slain.

He saw America first. Can they narrow the eyes
 To his eyes, the look of the free, the proud, and the scarred?
 Ask the new questions but live by the old replies?

They shall suffer him now, and the counsel he has to keep
 By lonely late-lit fires. They shall hear the homeward creep
 Of his coverless wagons, and wonder. Nor shall they sleep.

Night over the Hospital

Within four walls of room
The night comes dark enough;
But candles will not snuff:
They light the outer gloom.

Bedside, the day is gone,
As thought succeeded sight;
But there's the river bright
Until tomorrow's dawn.

Lights up, my soul! This play
Of medicine on mind,
On body well confined,
Has something still to say:

Star leads to other star,
Man's flight on Earth is fast;
His future lames the past,
Peace links him war to war.

How like a star himself:
His candle-powered suns
And he burn all at once.
But slide him on the shelf,

Indict his works, and then,
His mind at last relaxed,
His body undertaxed,
Time stands nor tells him when.

Waiting for Ether

The sounds beyond grow dim,
And waiting here under cover
I seem to float on the rim
Of a white world turning over.

Something has stopped outside
My door, as a step less firm
Than mine was paused and shied,
Not wanting to share my germ.

The wheel-bed rolling in
Confirms in a cheerless way
The spiral yellow grin
Of a man who was there today.

A quick flight down the hall,
Then up one floor to stop:
And a loud burst through the wall,
And a cold crash out the top.

Communion

If, after all,
My face goes to the wall,
Bled as the leaves about
From too much fading out:
What shall they gain me then,
The desiccant tongues of men?
The words I wanted most,
The sharing, not the ghost?
The saying, not the said?
The living, not the dead?

The face of earth is rough
And beautiful enough,
But man must light for man
The fires no other can,
And find in his own eye
Where the strange crossroads lie:
For he who has not heard
Dies trembling at the word,
And he who has not said
Will say it better dead.

Arcturus Over the Statler

"Transfixed by what?"

"Not what you think.
The sun has got
Till night to sink;
The stars have got
The night to wink;
The Earth (our lot)
Twirls on the brink
Of starry blot
And cosmic ink:
Its center's hot,
Its ice-caps clink."

"And what's it got?"

"Half us, half Chink.

"Those are big things,
Big facts: but those
Are strings
That everybody knows.
Transfixing facts?
I'll tell you one;
And still it acts
Through star or sun

As, civilizing
By degrees,
We're still surprising
The Chinese.

"Come over by
The window sill.
Let's watch the sky
And city fill
With lights. Some Stephen's
Got the itch
To close the heavens'
Central switch.
His man-made stars
Can constellate,
Or spin like Mars,
Or stay up late.
The night's a blaze
Of human shine:
But let's appraise
The Statler's sign.

"Transfixed by what!
Well, now, *you* think.
There's one more dot
Up there to blink:
Arcturus, not
That point of pink.
Cold, green, and wrought
Of Titan swink,

That tiny spot
Is where we link:
It's ocelot,
Malignant mink;
An eye that's got
A soul of zinc.

"You understand?"

"I don't—not yet."

"Let me expand:
What doesn't set
Is where the *and*
Comes in. Well, let
The mind go blank:
That's easy. Say
'It's what he drank.'
And then some day
(Or else some night)
You'll see the way
To see it right
As old dog Tray.

"O never mind!
I'll tell you now:
That sign is *signed*.
Don't ask me how,
Unless you're blind.
Well, knit your brow:

Let me remind
You.

 You'll allow
Arcturus makes
A pretty prod
Of light that breaks
On mortal clod;
It also makes
A period
For Statler (star:
Full stop). You see?
And there you are!

“Now you'll agree
It's only right
And true and just
That every night
The starry dust
Of such a grain
As cold Arcturus
Burns again
To reassure us
Something's fixed
In star or sun
Above each mixed
Nomadic one
Who, housing here,
Its votary,
Thinks nothing queer
That's Rotary.

Early for Once

At five o'clock in the morning clear
On the one sweet day for the blameless end,
When rising early I seem to hear
In the birds of the city the country blend;
And gathering tackle and rods and pack,
I slip downstairs and unlatch the door,
The dawn has opened the wider crack
And the stars have lessened to three or four.
But nobody walks in the timeless street:
From far away comes a muffled sound.
The day that my heart has cried "Retreat!"
I seem to be quitting the lonelier ground
For a boyhood brook in a depth of wood
That is close at hand, if I understood.

Black Road

Mist rose and filled the broad New Hampshire bowl
That lay below. Stars flickered in the Notch.
He passed a lake. Across the road a vole
Bounced like a rubber ball. Two eyes on watch
Dilated into empty cans. Such queer
Wings fluttered in and out of the deep wood.
He turned the wipers on and in the clear
Lunettes observed how white the birches stood.
Whiter for blight, he thought, and settled back
In second to begin the damp descent,
Like a lost bomber fearing homeward flak
And crowding dirty weather as it went.
He wrote the letter S and heard a train
Whistle for comfort near the State of Maine.

Grey Grievous Day

Grey grievous day
When I would steal away,
Spare me the parting glance,
The last good-by,
Or lifting of the hand
Before my lovely land
Is taken by advance
Of night and the stormy sky
And all of come what may.

The sequel dawn
Will find me far withdrawn,
Whatever fate decrees.
But dark to dark,
Down any road or way
I ever cared to stray,
Something beyond the trees
Set its skylight in the bark.
I'll go where I have gone.

Date Due

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M131s
C.2

A star by day. main
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